

Why You Should Give Your Money Away Today

Understanding what motivates charitable giving could inspire us all to be more generous.

By Patricia Snell Herzog

Dr. Herzog is an associate professor of philanthropic studies at Indiana University.

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Since Giving Tuesday was introduced in 2012, it has inspired more than \$1 billion in donations. Last year, estimated giving topped \$300 million. These numbers sound big — and they are. But they obscure the fact that relatively few individuals and families make charitable contributions: For example, in a typical year 45 percent of Americans give not even a single dollar, and 75 percent spend no time volunteering.

And this is a shame, because giving is an important way to help others, contribute to the public good and build the trust that glues a society together. One important step to encouraging more people to give is increasing our understanding of what motivates giving. When we better understand why people donate, we can be inspired to be more generous.

Charitable giving involves a complex array of motivations. I recently reviewed 14 projects funded by the University of Notre Dame's Science of Generosity initiative that studied the manifestations, causes and consequences of giving. Researchers found that even twins, despite their similar genetic makeup, behaved differently based on their ability to take on the perspective of another person.

Some people give because of tax incentives (which may explain why charitable giving was down a bit last year: Changes in the tax code made giving less advantageous for some families). A second motive also has to do with economics: Many people feel they simply can't afford to give.

Their willingness to give also depends on whether they view charitable organizations as honest and efficient. People can also give simply because they want to make the world a better place.

In my research, I've discovered that the most compelling reasons for people to give are social and relational benefits beyond the self. My colleague Heather E. Price and I found that people exist in a web of giving affiliations. People are more likely to give to charitable and religious causes when they have parents who were givers and partners who are supportive of giving, and when religious affiliations regularly expose them to religious-based calls to give. Living within generous social contexts matters. So, too, do friend groups. My colleague Song Yang and I found that people are more likely to donate when they have friends who donate and who ask them to donate.

As individuals it is important to see that there is no magical time in life when one suddenly becomes prepared to give, by having more money left to spend or more time on one's hands. Many people assume that as students they are too busy to volunteer, or as young parents they are too financially squeezed to donate.

But in my research, I learned that there are constraints on time and money at every stage in life. We can motivate ourselves to give throughout our lives, in whatever ways one can, by surrounding ourselves in giving-supportive contexts. We also need to be that giving-supportive context for others.

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Paradoxically, giving money away also brings joy to the giver. My colleagues Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson found that givers are happier and healthier and have a greater sense of purpose in life. This is not just in terms of giving money to formal charitable organizations but also extends to informal acts of kindness. For example, they found that Americans who were regularly generous with their neighbors were twice as likely to agree that they have a purpose than those who were less generous to neighbors.

What this research shows is that givers do not need to fear that they will lose out by donating their time or money to others. It can be hard to part with precious resources, but some will feel more compelled if they assure themselves that they will benefit too.

Combining these motivations for giving, it seems then that there is something in it for everyone. Nearly everyone can benefit from giving in ways that matter to them, whether it's financially, socially or personally.

Take a second look at that cause you have been thinking about donating to support, or that event you have been thinking about signing up for as a volunteer, or that neighbor who needs an extra hand. There is no better day than Giving Tuesday to say yes.

Patricia Snell Herzog is an associate professor of philanthropic studies in the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy.